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ABSTRACT

A survey was developed asking educators to describe their most effective strategies for teaching marginal learners--students who do not succeed academically in the regular classroom. A total of 97 surveys were returned, and the recommended strategies were compiled. The paper begins by describing marginal learners. This is followed by seven teaching strategy sections, focusing on: (1) peer tutoring; (2) individualized assessment; (3) individualized instruction (covering learning styles, teaching styles, individual projects, alternative assignments, adaptive materials, and team teaching); (4) group instructional strategies (direct instruction, hands-on activities, language arts skill development, and homework help); (5) positive reinforcement; (6) use of community resources; and (7) use of different organizational structures such as tutoring, resource rooms, and special programs. (JDD)

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KEA-AEL

Tips for Teaching Marginal Learners

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The Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) is located in Charleston, West Virginia. Its mission is to work with the Region's educators in an ongoing R & D-based effort to improve education and educational opportunity. To accomplish this mission AEL works toward:

- the improvement of professional quality,
- the improvement of curriculum and instruction,
- the improvement of community support, and
- the improvement of opportunity for access to quality education by all children.

Information about AEL projects, programs, and services is available by contacting the Appalachia Educational Laboratory, Post Office Box 1348, Charleston, West Virginia 25325.

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Study group members and KEA and AEL staff expect that the contributors to this publication, as well as hundreds of Kentucky teachers and other regional educators, will find solutions contained herein that are applicable in their own settings. For all the educators who find "Tips for Teaching Marginal Learners" helpful, thanks are in order to the following:

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INTRODUCTION

The Appalachia Educational Laboratory and the Kentucky Education Association cosponsored two study groups of educators during 1986. Each group of teachers was charged with the examination of an educational issue and the development of a product useful to Kentucky educators.

Effectively teaching marginal learners was identified by KEA-nominated study group members at their initial meeting as a need throughout the state and Region. Study group members recommended that pooling teacher ideas on effective teaching strategies for marginal learners and sharing that compilation with regional educators could be the "greatest need for the greatest number."

A survey was developed by group members asking educators to describe their most effective strategies for teaching marginal learners--students who do not succeed academically in the regular classroom (see Appendix A). Ten copies of the survey were given to each state's delegation during the 1986 National Education Association Representative Assembly in Louisville, and members were asked to return these to the KEA delegation. Additionally, surveys were distributed at the July 1986 KEA Leadership Conference, and participants returned data to KEA during the conference. A total of 97 surveys were returned.

Study group members used comparative analysis to classify responses into categories emerging from the data. Each study group member then summarized responses for a portion of the categories.

KEA recruited study group members, hosted study group meetings, edited and printed the survey, and reviewed and printed this publication. AEL conducted study group meetings, corresponded with members, coordinated data analysis and reporting, developed supplemental sections of the publication, and edited "Tips for Teaching Marginal Learners." Statewide dissemination to educators is planned by KEA. Each contributor who provided an address will receive a copy of the publication. AEL will disseminate the publication in its Region (TN, VA, WV), to the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, and within the educational Lab and Center network.

CONTRIBUTORS

Responses to the "Are Students Falling Through the Cracks?" survey collected in July 1986 from state caucuses at the NEA Representative Assembly provided the multi-state perspective to this publication. Participants in KEA's Leadership Conference in the same month also provided useful tips. KEA, AEL, and the study group who developed "Tips for Teaching Marginal Learners" would like to thank the following educators for their contributed strategies.

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PURPOSE AND USE OF THE PUBLICATION

Following the "Who are the Marginal Learners?" section, the reader will find seven sections of summarized survey responses. The common thread among the sections is that they were developed from teacher responses to the request for effective teaching strategies for marginal learners in the regular classroom. Responses were otherwise very diverse, ranging from reorganizing classrooms and schedules to utilizing peer assistance to incorporating community resources.

Many contributors emphasized that marginal learners' lack of success in the regular curriculum was a continual problem for them. Many expressed frustration over failing to find teaching alternatives appropriate for these students.

While study group members anticipated receiving numerous specific instructional strategies, many contributors focused on the need for developing a reinforcing atmosphere for success. Others praised the motivational increases that resulted from making wide use of community facilities and resource personnel. The most frequently cited contributions were programming instruction for individual students and peer assistance or tutoring.

Each section provides suggestions with application to all grades and subject areas. The reader is advised to read each section, highlighting strategies for future use. "Tips for Teaching Marginal Learners" could also provide the basis for a workshop/clinic for regular and special educators, instructional supervisors, and paraprofessionals. Curriculum developers might incorporate the special programs, grouping alternatives, and instructional strategies into activity descriptions.

Since the number of strategies provided is small in comparison to the number of marginal students in need of assistance, the project continues. KEA and AEL request that you complete the evaluation form enclosed in "Tips for Teaching Marginal Learners" (Appendix B) and return it to AEL. Please note the section for your description of effective strategies you have used successfully in teaching marginal learners. Just as in this publication, all contributors will be cited and will receive a copy of any revised "Tips for Teaching Marginal Learners."

WHO ARE THE MARGINAL LEARNERS?

At-risk students, students who fall between the cracks, slow learners, underachievers--various terms have been used to describe the students who are not succeeding academically in a regular education curriculum. These students are found in every grade, in every school, and in every community. With the decline in numbers of students being served in special education classes due to funding decreases, marginal learners may soon be found in every class. Unfortunately, few teachers have had training in effective methods for diagnosing learning needs, developing instructional strategies, and motivating these students.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

A recent review of the literature revealed few studies which define the "marginal learner," present recent research findings on characteristics of these students, or describe effective instructional strategies for regular education teachers to aid these students. Following teacher referral of students for evaluation, psychological and physical assessments, conferences on the results, and most appropriate placement, many students who are not succeeding in the regular classroom remain there since they do not "test low enough" to qualify for special education services.

Compensatory programs such as Chapter 1-funded reading and math tutoring may serve some marginal learners, but student transfer of skills to all subject areas may not occur. Also, curriculum articulation between the Chapter 1 supplemental instruction and basic skills instruction in the regular classroom may be weak. In addition, the school in which the marginal learner is enrolled may not qualify for Chapter 1 services.

Finally, motivation and effort to achieve are frequently very low among marginal learners. Many have been retained one or more years and have developed a failure self-concept. Since academic success is one of the few measures by which a child is judged, the marginal learner's school failure may lead to criticism and low expectations from family and peers.

With or without supplemental services, the marginal learner often becomes the dropout. Rescuing these students is the motivation from which this document springs. Helping marginal learners, those who are not succeeding academically in the regular curriculum, to become achievers is the aim of many regular education teachers. Recommending ways teachers might help marginal learners become successful students is the goal of this publication.

Tutoring

Tutoring sessions can be very effective in improving the skills of the marginal learner. Tutoring may be offered by the regular teacher, a paid or volunteer private tutor, or another student (see section on "Peer Tutoring"). Great Falls, Montana, schools provide one-on-one teacher assistance for learning disabled students. Some school systems pay for private tutoring when parents need financial assistance. Teachers may, on a volunteer basis, provide instructional assistance to students before or after school or during planning periods. Parents can be encouraged to work with their children at home by providing them with suggestions of specific activities.

Resource Room

Resource room programs focus on helping at-risk children. Students identified as having deficiencies in math, language arts, and/or other areas receive remedial instruction. Resource room teachers may work with students individually or in small groups. Chapter I and special education resource teachers may be available to assist children who need special help in one or more areas.

Special Programs

Many schools have developed innovative ideas for helping "at-risk" students.

Building-Based Management System (BBMS)--The BBMS is a coordination of special education, Chapter I, remedial assistance, etc. Each building has a learning specialist who works with the teachers. The learning specialist provides inservice when needed, researches and distributes appropriate curriculum materials, trains aides, and sets up cross-age tutoring programs. The BBMS program is designed so that the

needs of the low-functioning student will be met in the regular classroom.

Students Needing Assistance Program (SNA)--This program is designed for grades 7-9 and includes math, English, and writing. Students are scheduled for an additional class in the weak subject(s) every other day. The SNA class consists of 4-8 students and, when possible, teachers are assigned to their own classrooms. Work includes tutorial, computer, or additional practice. No grades are given. However, reports are sent to administrators twice each grade period, and each student is reviewed twice a year. The program receives no additional funding.

Individualized Learning Center (ILC) Program--In this program, small groups (8-13 students) are assigned each period to the ILC rather than a regular study hall. At least one teacher and one teacher's aide work with the students in the areas of social studies, math, science, and English. Teachers work through assignments with the students, help them review for tests, teach study skills, and communicate with the child's other teachers about overall progress.

"At-Risk" Program--This program is designed for the elementary school. The "At-Risk" students are identified as those who are in danger of dropping out for any reason--academics, attendance, etc. Teachers "adopt" these students and work with them as a special friend.

Student Advocate Program--Potential high school dropouts receive assistance from a designated social worker/counselor and intervention from peers. Skills lab courses in math, science, language arts, and social studies are included.

Student Minigrants--The minigrant offers funds ($50) for enrichment activities that capitalize on existing interests (gymnastics, computer workshops, magazine subscriptions, materials for competitions). Teachers identify the students, who then apply for the grants.

Elementary Counselor Class--In one program, the class of 8-12 students meets with the counselor once a week for a 30-45 minute session. Various social/emotional/practical topics are discussed, such as increasing self-awareness, making friends, preventing sexual abuse, preventing drug abuse, and coping when alone. Another program involves the guidance counselor meeting daily with marginal students to encourage them and keep them oriented.

PEER TUTORING

Peer tutoring is an instructional method that works effectively with marginal students by using peers to help understand directions and overcome problems. The peer tutor is often one of the at-risk student's own choosing. However, if the student does not seem to have a special rapport with any one student, the teacher matches up the peers. Care should be taken to pair partners who will be able to work together well. An adequate comfort level and a willingness to receive help from another student should be developed in the marginal students before initiating a peer tutoring system.

Some of the benefits of employing peer tutoring are:

- Gives the student a feeling of social acceptance and belonging, which often carries over to outside the classroom situation;
- Allows the student one-on-one attention and assistance when the teacher is busy with another student; and
- Removes the stigma of being "the dummy" in the regular classroom.

Through funded programs, some teachers have established peer tutoring programs that enable peer tutors to be paid for their services. High school students are used as the tutors. Teachers work with the high school guidance counselors to find the tutors. The tutors meet with their "students" and are paid directly ($3.00 per 60 minute session, two sessions per week).

A Kentucky teacher matches up above-average students with students who are working below class average in particular areas. When the above-average students complete their assignments, they help the below-average students complete theirs. When assignments are finished, the pairs use flash cards to review the learning objective that was addressed.

In addition to pairing marginal learners with higher-achieving peers, several other methods of peer tutoring are possible.

- Group students heterogeneously by performance level--A Wyoming teacher groups students at tables of four, with at least one above-level student and one on-level student. They help one another in their academic work as well as in their behavior management.
- Match at-risk students with younger students--By putting at-risk students into a tutorial situation, they must pay close attention and must master the task at hand in order to help the younger students. This also encourages a greater sense of self-worth and accomplishment.
- Use peer teams to work together on group assignments--Teams of three or four students, heterogeneously grouped, can jointly solve a problem, research an idea or topic, complete a set of questions, etc. One student may be requested to submit a paper for the group, or each student may be asked to submit a copy of the group effort. This situation emphasizes the need for cooperation and reward for group effort. Each student is expected to contribute and participate in the group as an equal member. This differs somewhat from the traditional concept of peer tutoring, which sees one student as having more ability than another.

ASSESSMENT

Individualized assessment is important in planning the educational strategy for any student, but it is especially essential for the marginal student. Such assessment can be done with the help of auxilliary personnel within the school, such as the guidance counselor, school psychologist, or special education teacher. Assessment should be done to determine areas of skill competency as well as deficits. Assessment can also determine the learning style preferences of the student.

In deciding whether to refer a child for individualized assessment, the teacher should consider the following areas:

- Age (younger children are more difficult to accurately assess),

- Achievement as compared to IQ,
- Motivation to learn,
- Behavior or significant changes in behavior (hyperactivity, attention deficit disorder, acting-out behaviors, withdrawal, extreme fears, etc.),
- Home situation (especially physical or sexual abuse, divorce, death in the family, birth of a sibling),
- Possible vision or hearing difficulties, and
- Substance abuse.

The teacher might be particularly attentive to children who display a combination of risk factors.

Once data is collected from the assessment, the regular teacher can effectively work with other teachers or alone to develop an instructional program to meet the needs of the individual marginal student. The educational program should enable students to use personal strengths to their advantage, as well as to work on areas that require remediation.

INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION

Individualized instruction is an effective method for helping students at risk. It involves altering materials, assignments, and classroom management techniques to meet the needs and learning styles of individual children.

Learning Styles and Teaching Styles

Teachers should recognize and effectively apply the notion that not everyone learns through the same modalities/learning styles. An understanding of the operations of the left and right sides of the brain can give much insight into the learning styles of children. This understanding can also offer suggestions as to which methods can best be used to correct deficiencies in a student's learning. While some children learn best through the traditional learning modalities of sight and hearing, others are more adept at learning through kinesthetic or tactile activities. A positive classroom atmosphere provides for all these learning styles. Teachers should also be aware of their own instructional style. Adjustments to this teaching style may need to be made to adapt to the learning needs of the students. A variety of materials should be available for all the modalities. Students should be assessed to determine which modality is strongest for them (see "Assessment" section).

Individual Projects

Classes can be designed with the needs and abilities of the at-risk student in mind. One can also devise class and individual projects of interest to the marginal student.

Alternative Assignments

Assignments can be altered to meet the level of ability of the student. Although all students use the same textbook, the assignments that follow can be adapted to allow for the individual levels of the students. At-risk students who are allowed to do shorter or less complicated assignments can still learn the required skill successfully without becoming frustrated by the enormous amount of time they must spend on the assignment. The implementation of individualization can be enhanced by color coding assignments on the chalkboard. In that way, the students can be self-

directed. This gives the teacher more freedom.

Adaptive Materials

Special instructional help can be offered to marginal students through the use of adaptive materials. For example, audio tapes can be prepared by the teacher so that the student can review vocabulary, or read along with the tape to complete a chapter assignment in a text. Microcomputer problem-solving software can be used for remediation on an individual basis. Other activities can include field trips, filmstrips, plays, and hands-on activities. These not only serve as remediation for the marginal student, who benefits from concrete examples and experiences, but also as enrichment for the grade-level ability student.

Team Teaching

Team teaching situations can provide increased individualized attention and instruction. Both special education and regular classroom teachers may team together. As an aside from this team teaching approach, special education teachers are an excellent resource for the regular teacher in planning the instructional program for the marginal student. The special education teacher can serve as a consultant in identification of skill deficits and the necessary task analysis to correct these deficits. The special education teacher can also suggest intervention models for discipline, reinforcement, etc. Using teacher aides in special education classrooms can free up the time of special education teachers for consultation with regular teachers.

Individualization of instruction is difficult to do at first; however, it can be accomplished. It allows students to do the work on a more flexible schedule and encourages in-depth work in areas of high interest to the individuals.

GROUP INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Direct Instruction

This method teaches skills directly through structured, teacher-identified activities that involve considerable drill and practice and a high level of teacher-student interaction. Direct instruction keeps the students on task with the assignment at hand. It provides for teacher input, immediate student response, practice, and reinforcement. Direct instruction cuts down on a great deal of disruptive behavior and allows for identification and remediation of students' misunderstandings before evaluation occurs.

Hands-on Activities

Providing students with concrete examples of skills being taught appears to help marginal students grasp concepts. One way to do this is by setting up skill labs, or learning centers, to provide hands-on experience. Provide centers with ideas to use, pictures, magazines, books, and other materials pertaining to the units being studied. Another method is to have students construct displays and bulletin boards for credit. By relating these projects to real-life situations, one can further attract the learner's

attention to the concept. Interest brings on learning, and test scores improve as more projects are attempted.

For elementary grades, after you have taught a concept, have the class host a theme party based on that concept (e.g., eastern forests, outer space, wildlife, etc.). Have students design the invitations, make up party games, plan refreshments, and design decorations, all based upon facts they learned from the unit.

Language Arts Skill Development

Language arts skills, including reading, spelling, and writing, are often lacking in the marginal learner.

For teaching reading and writing to primary students, have them trace the words with their index fingers. Then have the learners trace the words with crayons.

Older students can create and write their own books, based upon the learning level of the individual student. The books should contain new vocabulary words and use correct grammar.

An effective instructional strategy for vocabulary enhancement involves students' vocabulary notebooks. Each student keeps a weekly, or daily, list of vocabulary words relevant to the ability level of that student. This list contains the correct spelling of each word, part of speech, definition, and correct usage in a sentence.

A team game, "Vocabulary Blastoff," can be played using words taken from the vocabulary notebooks. The first person to correctly write a given word, list its part of speech, and write the definition on the chalkboard gets a possible three points for his, or her, own team. Points are awarded based on correct spelling, correct part of speech, and correct definition.

Homework Help

"At-risk" students often need assistance in completing homework correctly.

To help students conquer homework assignments, allow them some time to begin such assignments in class. You can monitor any problems they are having and can clear up such problems before, not after, the assignment is completed.

Alternating evening homework assignments between math and language arts, have students write out a review of the math facts or reading words covered in class that day. This reinforces concepts taught each day.

Homework hotlines have been shown to be effective in helping children with their homework assignments. Some school districts and local education associations use public access channels for cable television to answer call-in questions regarding homework. Others man telephones, on a rotating basis, to provide assistance with homework.

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Time spent giving students some successes will be repaid by their increased self-concepts. In turn, their fear of failure--which probably has been reinforced often--will decrease. Some suggestions for positively reinforcing students are:

- Reward students for what they do, not for what they don't do.

- Develop personal relationships with the students.
- Use motivational projects to encourage students. Build upon the interests of individual students.
- Display projects for parents or classmates to see.
- Offer positive comments and praise.
- Plan for success. Make an extra effort for students to accomplish tasks and enhance their self-esteem.
- Use a variety of rewards, including stickers, extra computer time, lunch or dinner with the teacher, and positive notes to parents and/or the student.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Community and church groups can often be encouraged to develop volunteer tutoring programs. Many communities have organizations such as the Foster Grandparent Program and RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program) who are ready, willing, and able to give additional help and much-needed attention to the marginal learner. These volunteers tutor students during the school hours with instructional methods and materials selected by the teacher. The use of adult volunteers is not limited to retired persons. Parents of school-age children are an excellent source of individual help for students. They are often willing to work an hour a week in the classroom if asked.

To increase volunteer help from the community, celebrate a "Back to School Day" by inviting business and community people to the school. They will obtain first-hand knowledge of the school and the students' needs.

Are Students Falling "Through the Cracks"?

kea

By the year 2000, projections estimate the majority of pupils in the average classroom will be marginal students. The marginal student--the pupil who has fallen "through the cracks"--not quite high enough academically for the regular classroom, not quite low enough for the special education program. How do you effectively deal with such students now? How will you effectively deal with them in the future?

A study committee of Kentucky Education Association members and the Appalachia Educational Laboratory is seeking your input on this timely issue. Based on a compilation of your ideas, (e.g.: peer tutoring, team teaching incorporating regular and special teachers) and a review of current literature, KEA will produce and disseminate a publication addressing successful methods of teaching marginal students.

Please include your name and address so that we can give you credit in the publication for your contribution.

Thank you for your assistance with this guide for Kentucky teachers. This autumn you will receive a copy of the publication at the address you have supplied.

Tips for Teaching the Marginal Learner

Evaluation/Additions

KEA and AEL appreciate your use of "Tips for Teaching the Marginal Learner." We hope that you will assist us in improving the publication by completing the following questions:

1. Which "tips" have you used with your students? Which were most effective?

2. What changes would you suggest making in "Tips"?

3. How did you receive your copy of "Tips"? How many teachers in your building are you aware of who received a copy?

4. Have your shared your "Tips" copy with other teachers? If so, how many?

5. In what ways could "Tips" be disseminated to more educators?

6. Have you used "Tips" in any inservice education activity? Please describe.

7. Please describe any strategy(ies) for assisting marginal learners you have used successfully. Your contribution(s) will be cited in any revised edition of "Tips for Teaching the Marginal Learner." You can receive a copy by providing your address below.

Name: _____

School/District: _____

Address: _____

_____

Thank you for completing this evaluation/additions form. Please mail to AEL, P. O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325.

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Charleston, West Virginia

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